

A Conversation with SYNC Case Managers

By Hannah Fuller, Get IN Chicago Intern

It was a cool and cloudy October afternoon on East 103rd street. People were scarce, and very few cars were passing by the Metropolitan Family Services-Calumet office. As the SYNC (Strengthening Youth through a Network of Care) team filed into the conference room for their monthly team meeting, jokes were being shared, hugs were given freely, and laughter was heard from the hallways—a surprising juxtaposition to the serious work that the MFS caseworkers who are part of the SYNC team do every day.

Get IN Chicago had the opportunity to sit down with SYNC case managers and learn more about their day-to-day work, why we must never give up on a young person and how they couldn't do their jobs without the support of their colleagues.

Get IN Chicago began the SYNC model in 2016 to combine mentoring and case management for acutely high-risk youth in Chicago. Mentors have more frequent contact with youth, providing a consistent and supportive presence to help youth process feelings, identify challenges and set goals. Case managers are available for consultation and service referral for the youth and family, and typically meet twice monthly with the youth.

The complex needs of acutely high-risk youth combined with the challenge of engaging them steadily over time is a tall order for case managers and means that they are rarely in their offices. Jennifer McGraw, LCSW and Program Director at MFS says, "Our case managers are dedicated to youth and to families. They go above and beyond. This isn't your typical case management, this is street outreach."

Rene, a case management supervisor at MFS adds, "We go to their schools and we try to go to their homes." Jide, a case manager, details eating lunch with her clients, attending parent teacher conferences with her clients, and, accompanying parents of her clients to funerals when they lose children due to violence. "The kids know they have us," she points out. "They know we're around."

This level of engagement requires time and dedication, which can be a challenge with significant caseloads. Most of the team agrees that they are rarely really "off the clock" and that the needs of the kids don't stop. "There's something always going on," Rene shared. As if on cue, Rene is handed a note, reads it to himself, nods to the messenger, and says to the group, "See, I'm working now."

As the case managers share more about their work, the seriousness of the issues their youth are dealing with becomes clearer: depression, suicidal thoughts, homelessness, domestic violence in romantic relationships, abuse in the home, and the need for employment among them. All of these issues are complex, and the current caseloads of the managers as well as the waiting lists for some services don't allow for everything to be dealt with to a satisfying result. Positive youth outcomes, even with care and services provided at MFS, are never guaranteed. As one case manager, Erika, shared about two of her clients, "one went to college and one went to prison."

With the varied and significant needs of young people and large case-loads, self-care is a priority. "You have to have something to give back to yourself and your family," suggests Jessie, another case manager. "You cannot be empty or drained when giving to other people. This work is not easy, and it won't be any easier if you're empty." The case managers discuss various strategies for work-life balance, including pacing themselves, recognizing that they can't do everything, and having a sense of discernment. One case manager says, "Everything can be an emergency with young adults. You have to know what's a real emergency."

Gaining trust and building accountability among youth are just two of the challenges that many case managers experience, and the second depends largely on the first. Efrem, a case manager for more than 20 years says, "Kids think, 'everyone else in my life is quitting. Let's see how long it takes you.'" He responds to those kids by saying, "I'll be here as long as you want me to be." After sharing a story about a youth whose mother and uncles were selling drugs and who wanted him to be part of the family business (no client names or identifying information was shared in the course of our meeting), Efrem was asked if he'd ever given up on a youth. "Never. Because every one of us at this table, no matter our circumstances, had someone say 'you can do better than this.'"

But he's not a pushover. "I can't want something more than you do," he tells them when they don't seem motivated. Many of the team members in the room nod in agreement, and so he continues, "We [case managers] sometimes want something more than these kids. We have to make it clear to them from the beginning that 'it's up to you, but we are here to support you.'"

Many case managers speak to how important the camaraderie and support among their colleagues is to this work and the supervisors at the table express their ongoing concern for staff safety and mental health. On some occasions it becomes clear that the race, gender or educational level of a case manager is creating barriers for success with a client. In these circumstances, case managers talk together about who might be a better fit for reaching the youth.

Tenacious, approachable, relatable, non-judgmental, reliable, passionate, aware, resourceful, sympathetic, and transparent are some of the qualities the SYNC team suggests case managers must have when working with acutely high-risk youth, along with truly caring about young

people. “There are youth who will absolutely run with the resources you give them,” shares one case manager. “Others are going to take a lot more time, and a lot more out of you. Often, they can’t articulate their gratitude, but when they reach out, that’s them saying thank you.”